

MISSOURI DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION



February/March 2012

Explor

adventures in nature



WOOD DUCK DIARIES

LIFE IN THE
MARSH ISN'T ALL
IT'S QUACKED
UP TO BE

Missouri Conservation Xplor



ON THE COVER



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Life in the marsh isn't all it's quacked up to be.

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ON THE WEB

Visit www.xplormo.org for cool videos, sounds, photos, fun facts and more!

Xplor

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WHAT IS IT?

DON'T KNOW?

Jump to the Page 16 to find out.



① When you hear me sing, it's time to ring in spring.
② I can't hit a note until I inflate my throat.

③ It isn't too deep where I leap and peep.
④ "X" marks the space where my concert takes place.

you discover

TRAIN a CHICKADEE



Black-capped chickadee

Chickadees are itty-bitty birds, but they're also fearless. With patience, you can coax these gutsy fluff balls to eat from your hand. Fill a bird feeder with seed, walk 10 big steps away, and wait quietly for chickadees to arrive. Each day, take a step closer. When you can stand beside the feeder without scaring the birds, grab a handful of seed and hold *really* still. Don't be surprised if a chickadee lands on your hand for a quick bite to eat.

With winter almost gone and spring just around the corner, there's plenty for you to discover outside in February and March. Here are a few ideas to get you started.

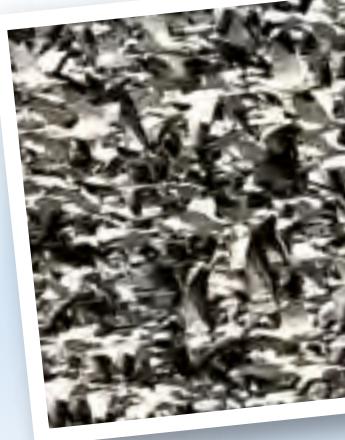
Send a squirrel a VALENTINE.

This Valentine's Day, send some love to the critters in your backyard. Place a heart-shaped cookie cutter in a baking pan and line the inside of the cutter with plastic wrap. Drop in some birdseed and place a loop of red ribbon at the top. Pour water to just below the cookie cutter's edge and put everything in your freezer. When your birdseed Valentine has frozen, pop it out of the cutter, remove the plastic wrap, and hang it outside on a tree.



GET YOUR GOOSE.

Standing beneath a swirling swarm of yelping snow geese is thrilling. But with 5 million snows migrating north every spring, the geese are literally eating themselves out of house and home. The overabundant geese strip huge swaths of Arctic tundra bare when they feed, destroying habitat for birds and other animals. To help bring their numbers back to normal, a special hunting season runs from February 1 to April 30. If you'd like to participate—and help save the tundra—visit www.xplormo.org/node/16777.



Discover Nature at these fun events.

Visit the "Road-Kill Cafe" at the **VULTURE VENTURE**

Shepherd of the Hills Fish Hatchery near Branson
February 18, noon–5 p.m.
Call 417-334-4865, ext. 0



Turkey vulture

Get the scoop on critter poop at

NATURE CENTER AT NIGHT-SCAT!

Cape Girardeau
Conservation Nature Center
February 9, 5–8 p.m.
Call 573-290-5218

See signs of nature
awakening during a guided
SPRING EVENING WALK

Runge Conservation Nature
Center, Jefferson City
February 23, 6–8 p.m.
Call 573-526-5544

Bird's-foot violet





This bur oak near Columbia is the largest of its kind in the country.

Set a RECORD.

Missouri's tallest tree, a pumpkin ash in the Bootheel, stretches higher than four school buses stacked end to end. A cottonwood north of Kansas City is so wide, six kids holding hands barely encircle its trunk. Both are "champion trees," the largest of their kind in Missouri. Even bigger trees might lurk afield, and you can join the hunt to find them. Discover a record breaker, and you'll get a certificate for your wall—and bragging rights. Learn to measure enormous trees at www.mdc.mo.gov/node/4831.



LET THE STARS GUIDE YOUR WAY.

Ancient sailors used stars to guide their boats across the oceans.

You, too, can navigate by the stars. First, find the Big Dipper. It's a group of seven stars that form the shape of a soup ladle. Trace a straight line from the last two stars in the ladle's lip until you run into a star as bright as those in the Big Dipper. This is the North Star. If you face it, east will be to your right, west will be to your left, and south will be directly behind you.

Survey a SNAG.



Snow geese

Biologists call a dead tree still standing a snag. Animals call it home. Next time you're in the woods, look closely at any snag you find. Do you see holes in its trunk? Those are made by insects tunneling through the wood—snug as a bug in a snag—or by woodpeckers searching for tasty insects. Knock on the snag to see if anyone's home. Holes in snags provide cozy places for squirrels, raccoons and bats to rest, and nests for screech owls, chickadees and other birds. A snag is no drag!



Gray squirrel

Learn to use your GPS for TREASURE HUNTING

Missouri Department of Conservation's Kirksville office
March 17, 2–3 p.m.
Make reservations at 660-785-2420



Tap a tree and make your own syrup at the **MAPLE SUGAR FESTIVAL**

Rockwoods Reservation, St. Louis
February 4, 10 a.m.–3 p.m.
Call 636-458-2236



MDC 
DISCOVER
nature

Looking for more ways to have fun outside? Find out about Discover Nature programs in your area at www.xplormo.org/node/2616.

PREDATOR

VS.

PREY

The struggle to survive isn't always a fair fight. Here's what separates nature's winners from its losers.



Butterfly bombs are little balls made of soil and wildflower seeds. You toss the bombs wherever you want a butterfly garden to grow. Rain will melt the clay and wash the seeds into the ground. In a few months, you'll have an explosion of wildflowers perfect for any butterflies that flutter by.

GATHER THESE INGREDIENTS

- **Potting soil**
- **Powdered clay** (available at most craft stores)
- **Wildflower seeds** (Make sure to choose wildflowers that are native to Missouri. Visit www.grownative.org for ideas on which seeds to use.)
- **Water**

GET YOUR HANDS DIRTY

- **In a mixing bowl**, combine 5 parts powdered clay, 5 parts potting soil and 1 part wildflower seeds.
- **Add a tiny bit of water**. You'll need just enough to make a thick, clay-like dough. Don't add too much at first; you can always add more water later.
- **Use your hands** to roll the mixture into balls the size of large gum balls.
- **Put your butterfly bombs** on an old newspaper and let them harden in a cool, dry place for at least three days.
- **Toss your butterfly bombs** wherever you want flowers to grow.

HOW TO

Build butterfly BOMBS



Tiger swallowtail



Blazing star

Gray-headed coneflower

Glade coneflower

Columbine

Wild geranium

CHASING



RAINBOWS

by Matt Seek • photos by Dave Stonner

Ask an angler about rainbow trout, and you'll see a dreamy, wistful look cross their eyes. They may even drool a little. Perhaps it's because trout taste yummy. Or maybe because they're so beautiful— sleek and silver, freckled with spots, a pink blush streaking their sides. More likely, it's because trout swim in only the cleanest, clearest, spring-fed streams, so fishing for them always involves stunning scenery. Or, maybe—just maybe—that dreamy look happens because trout are so fun to catch.

WHERE TO GO



If you've never fished for rainbows, Missouri's four trout parks offer a perfect place to hone your skills. The main fishing season at the parks runs from March 1 through October 31. Every night during that time, hatchery workers stock each park with hundreds of trout. The next morning, the newly released fish are hungry—and gullible.

- ① Roaring River Trout Park
- ② Bennett Spring Trout Park
- ③ Montauk Trout Park
- ④ Meramec Spring Park



GEAR UP

- You don't need a fly rod to catch trout. A **spin-casting rod and reel** works fine.
- Trout have excellent eyesight, and the water where they swim is crystal clear. So, load your reel with **monofilament line** that's hard to see. Four-pound test or lighter is best.
- Skinny line snaps when you lift big fish from the water. Bring a **net** so you don't lose a lunker.
- **Needle-nose pliers** help remove tiny trout hooks.
- Pinch **split shot** on your line to make casting easier and pull your lure deep where big fish creep. Avoid lead shot. It's poisonous to you and other animals.
- For fishing from the bank, a **tackle box** works fine. For wading, wear a **fishing vest** to keep your tackle high and dry.
- If you plan to eat your catch, pack a **stringer** labeled with your name and address.
- To fish the trout parks, you must purchase and wear a **daily trout tag** from the park store. If you're 15 or younger the tag costs \$2; if you're 16 or older it costs \$3, and you'll also need a **Missouri fishing license**.

HEAD OUT

Before casting a line, learn the rules. Certain sections of the parks may allow only catch-and-release fishing or forbid certain lures. Ask for details when you buy your trout tag.

Remember: Early birds catch more trout.

Newly released fish have never felt a hook and will strike at lures with gusto. Once they've been hooked a few times, trout quickly get lockjaw.

You can catch plenty from the bank, but wading lets you cast to lunker holes unreachable from shore. Some rocks are slippery and the current can be swift, so watch your step and have an adult nearby. Whether you wear waders or shoes, make sure their soles are made of a solid material. Footwear with felt or spongy soles isn't allowed.

Be courteous to other anglers. Keep quiet and don't throw rocks. Walking in front of other anglers is rude, but watch out for backcasts when you walk behind them. Line from fly fishers can unfurl backwards an astounding distance, and trout lures make ugly—and painful—earrings!

BAIT UP

Trout eat tiny insects, small fish and everything in between. Your lure should look like prey or smell yummy (at least to a fish).

- Hatchery-raised trout are fed smelly fish pellets. That's why stinky dough baits catch lots of fish at trout parks. Mold enough dough around a size 16–18 treble hook to just cover the hook.
- Small marabou jigs have tricked many trout into thinking they're slurping delicious insects.
- Spinner-type lures mimic darting, silvery fish trout find tasty. A snap swivel will keep the spinner from twisting and tangling your line.

CAST OUT

For dough bait, slip a bobber on your line, cast upstream and let the bait drift with the current. Trout bite lightly, so keep your line tight. Reel in slack as your lure flows downstream or you'll miss lots of nibbles. Fish a jig the same way, but jerk the rod every so often to twitch the jig in a trout-tempting way.



If you get bored watching bobbers drift, try a spinner. Cast out and reel in just fast enough to make the spinner spin. Every few seconds, stop and give the lure a little jerk. To a hungry trout, this looks like a struggling minnow.

Trout can act more finicky than your 2-year-old sister at supper. If you're getting skunked, ask another angler for tips. Sometimes just changing the color of your lure will turn your stringer from fishless to fishfull.

HOOK UP

If you feel a trout sip up your lure, wait a split second then give a medium tug on the rod. Trout are dainty diners, and if you tug too hard, you'll pull the hook right out of its mouth.

Bring the fish to your net quickly. That way, if you decide to release the trout, it won't be too tired to swim. Keep it in the water while you gently remove the hook. To revive a spent trout, hold it with its head pointing upstream until it swims out of your hand.

Should you decide to keep your catch, remember that once you slip your fourth trout on the stringer, you must quit fishing. After



that, the only thing to hold you over until the next day will be wistful dreams of chasing rainbows.

the Wood Duck diaries



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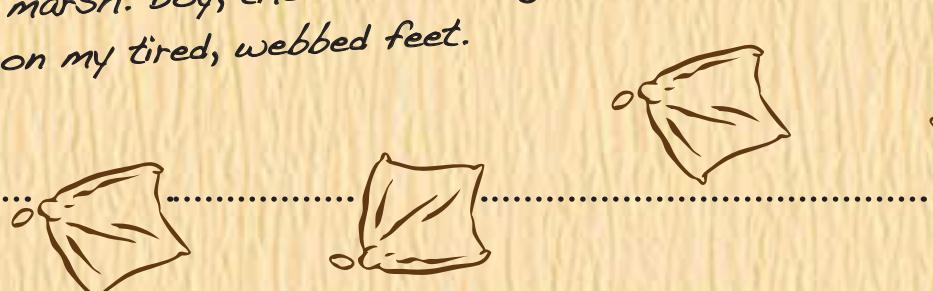
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Taking the Plunge

May 17—Hi, I'm Lily. I may look like a fluff ball now, but when I grow up I'll be a beautiful wood duck. Yesterday was my hatch day. Whoever claimed eggs are fragile never tried to peck their way out of one! Mom says today we must abandon our nest high in the tree. She flew down first to check for danger. I clawed my way to the edge, jumped, and flapped my stubby wings. "I'm flying," I thought. Then—oomph!—I hit the ground. I bounced a few times but wasn't hurt. I guess being a fluff ball isn't so bad. We waddled nearly a mile before reaching the marsh. Boy, the water felt good on my tired, webbed feet.



www.mikelentzphotography.com



Sneaky Mink

June 2—I had just swallowed a bug (yum!) when I heard mom squeal. She'd spotted a hungry mink slinking nearby! As I skittered into the cattails to hide with my brothers and sisters, mom began thrashing and splashing, pretending to have a broken wing. The mink must have thought he'd scored an easy duck dinner, because he chased mom far off into the marsh. She flew back a short time later and gathered us up with a quack. Mom does her best, but her tricks don't always work. I hatched with 11 brothers and sisters. There's only six of us now.



My New Bracelet

July 9—Strangest. Day. Ever. While dabbling for breakfast, I discovered a strange box floating in the marsh. Dabbling means I take a gulp of water, let it run out slots in my beak, and eat the tasty insects and seeds left behind. But back to the box: All you need to know is it was filled with corn—and wood ducks love corn. I scrambled inside, and my brothers and sisters soon joined the feast. But after we

stuffed our tummies, we discovered we couldn't escape. We were trapped! A person waded up and pulled us out, one by one. I was so scared. The human poked and prodded us, slipped a shiny silver bracelet on each of our legs, and let us go. Humans are so weird. —→



Migration Vacation

January 24— A few days after the bracelet incident, mom split. I guess she figured 8-week-old ducklings are big enough to fend for themselves. I hung with my nest mates for a couple weeks, but once we could fly, we scattered. I spent winter in a Mississippi swamp. Now, I'm

slowly migrating back to Missouri. I take off at sunset, fly all night, and splash down in a new marsh at sunrise to nap and gorge on acorns. Today, a boy wood duck named Drake caught my eye. He was showing off, and I normally pay no attention to such things, but ooh-la-la, he looked handsome!



Nursery Search

March 2—Drake and I are a couple! We arrived in Missouri a few days ago and found a marsh called Eagle Bluffs. It looks like a nice neighborhood to raise a family. Unlike most ducks who nest on the ground, we wood ducks prefer a sky-rise apartment. Our skinny bodies are perfect for squeezing into holes in trees, and our webbed feet have strong claws to grip branches. Each morning, Drake follows along while I search for a place to nest. I've inspected every knothole in every nearby tree and even a few abandoned woodpecker cavities, but none fit the bill.



Home Sweet Box

March 11—I finally found a place to nest! It's a cozy box perched right over the marsh. Drake sits on the roof keeping a lookout for danger while I go inside to lay eggs—he's so brave! I've lined the box with down plucked from my chest. Ouch! Not only does the down make a soft cradle for my eggs, but plucking it out also exposes a patch of bare skin I can press against my eggs to keep them warm. I lay one creamy-white egg each morning. The rest of the day I spend sunning on top of the box and stuffing my beak with every insect I can pluck from the murky brown marsh. I need all the protein I can get to make more eggs.



Life's Egg-cellent

April 2—Wood ducks have never been great at math, but when I slipped out this morning for a snack, I swear I had only 12 eggs. Now I have 13. I bet another wood duck laid an egg in my nest! It happens all the time, you know. Drake left me, by the way, but I don't care. My eggs are the only company I need. To pass the time, I talk softly to the little ducks inside.

They can hear me through the eggshells. In a couple weeks they'll hatch, and I'll have a little flock of fluff balls to watch over. Isn't life egg-cellent?



© Richard & Susan Day/VIREO



WILD JOBS

WHEN WILDFIRES THREATEN FORESTS,
FIREFIGHTER SAM JEWETT CRANKS UP HIS BULLDOZER TO KEEP THEM CONTAINED.



Q: HOW DOES A 15,000-POUND BULLDOZER PUT OUT FOREST FIRES?

A: A bulldozer is handy for plowing fire lines, which are strips of dirt surrounding a fire. Fires can't burn dirt, so the lines keep fires contained.

Q: WHEN DO FOREST FIRES HAPPEN?

A: They occur at any time, but I stick close to my radio and dozer from October until green-up in late April.

Q: WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU AREN'T FIGHTING FIRES?

A: I work as a forester, helping make sure forests provide homes for wildlife, places for people to camp and hunt, and a healthy supply of trees to make things such as lumber.

Q: WHAT'S THE BEST PART OF YOUR JOB?

A: When the fire's out. Fighting fires is hot, smokey and dangerous. But after the last ember's doused, there are always good stories to tell. Plus, it makes me feel good to protect thousands of trees and animals.

Q: WHAT'S THE WORST PART?

A: Working at night keeps me on my toes. In the dark, you have to pay extra close attention to where you're driving the dozer. Sucking smoke isn't fun, either.

Q: EVER BEEN SCARED WHILE FIGHTING A FIRE?

A: Sometimes. The Ozarks are full of steep, gnarly hillsides where it's easy to get a dozer stuck—especially when it's dark and smokey. And, being stuck is the last thing you want when a fire is burning toward you.

STRANGE, but TRUE!

YOUR GUIDE TO ALL THE
UNUSUAL, UNIQUE,
AND UNBELIEVABLE
STUFF THAT GOES ON IN NATURE



CANVASBACKS

the speed demons of the waterfowl world, zip through the sky at more than 60 miles per hour.

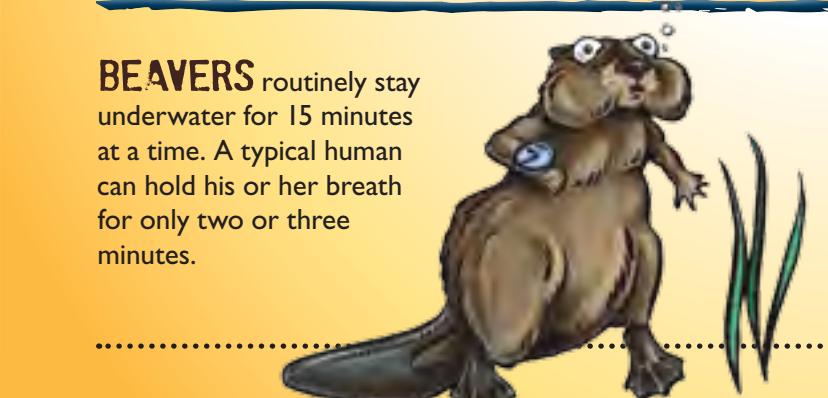


Although they're no bigger than the "S" in small, **SPRINGTAILS** can fling themselves 4 inches into the air. A human-sized springtail could leap over a 20-story building!



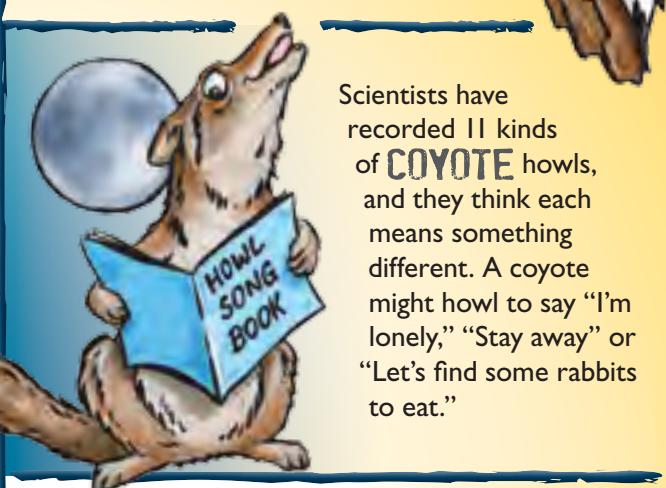
Male SPRING PEEPERS

have trouble hearing their own calls. Female peepers, however, hear the males' love songs loud and clear.



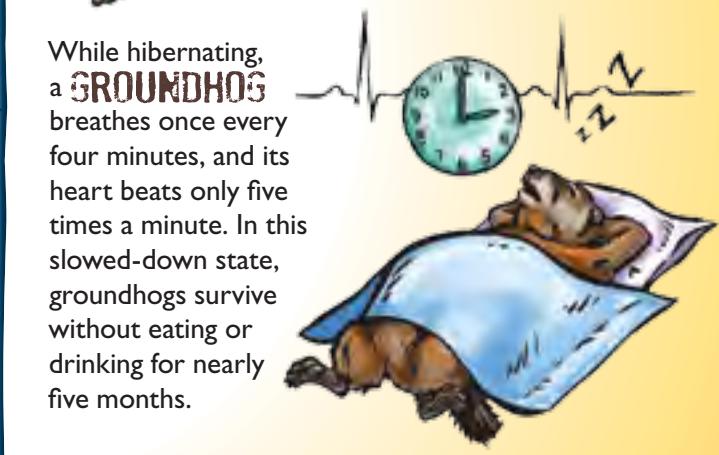
BEAVERS routinely stay underwater for 15 minutes at a time. A typical human can hold his or her breath for only two or three minutes.

WOODPECKERS have spongy skulls that tightly cradle their brains. This helps them avoid bashing their melons to mush while hammering on trees.

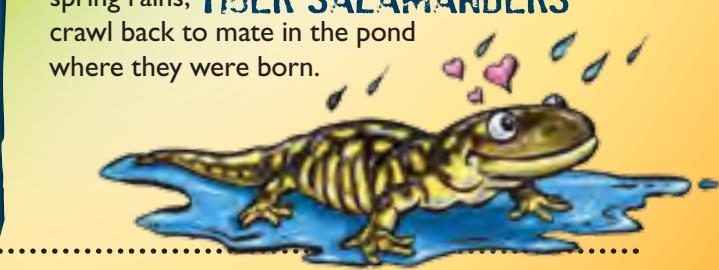


Scientists have recorded 11 kinds of **COYOTE** howls, and they think each means something different. A coyote might howl to say "I'm lonely," "Stay away" or "Let's find some rabbits to eat."

While hibernating, a **GROUNDHOG** breathes once every four minutes, and its heart beats only five times a minute. In this slowed-down state, groundhogs survive without eating or drinking for nearly five months.



Under cover of darkness, during fall and spring rains, **TIGER SALAMANDERS** crawl back to mate in the pond where they were born.



XPLOR-NOR

The Mating Game

It's mating season, and these female critters are pining for a partner. We've hidden five would-be boyfriends behind the curtain on the next page, and the guys have told us how they plan to impress their mates. Can you play Cupid and match each male's courtship clue with the right lady looking for love?



ANSWER TO

WHAT IS IT?

FROM PAGE 1

In late February, male spring peepers begin singing to attract mates. Their loud, ringing calls are a sign spring is near. Peepers raise a ruckus by inflating their throats like balloons. To find these frogs, explore puddles and shallow ponds near woods. You must look closely, though. Peepers aren't much longer than a paperclip and range in color from tan to gray with an X-shaped mark on their backs.





a **My sweet tweets are better than Valentine treats.** I know nearly 200 tunes and can imitate barking dogs, croaking frogs, birds singing—even cellphones ringing. The more borrowed ballads I belt out, the better my chances of attracting a diva for a duet.

b **The way to a woman's heart is through her stomach.** So when I show up for a date, I bring a gift of something good to eat—fish, usually.

c **I dress to impress when I come courting.** Ladies swoon when I flex my bright orange throat and emerald-green body. If that doesn't ruffle their collars, I do push-ups to show how strong I am!

d **I don't take no for an answer when I ask a girl out.** If she scampers off, I keep up the chatter and chase after her until she says yes.

e **Gals like a guy who can get his groove on.** I shimmy, slither and sway to show off my dance moves. And, if another guy tries to cut in, I push him flat on his face.

For more on the weird, wacky and romantic things animals do to attract a mate, visit www.xplormo.org/node/2980.

Answers: a3, b2, c1, d5, e4

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Shawn Cunningham

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FREE TO MISSOURI HOUSEHOLDS

CRITTER CORNER Muskrat



Danny Brown

Who you calling chubby? Despite their potbellied appearance, muskrats are perfectly suited for life in water. Equipped with waterproof fur, paddle-like hind feet and lungs that would impress an Olympic swimmer, muskrats can stay underwater for 17 minutes at a stretch.